

ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK ON CAIRO

Histories, Representations and Discourses

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CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Contributors</i>	<i>xiv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xxi</i>
 PART 1	
Histories	1
1 Cairo: The State of a City <i>Nezar AlSayyad</i>	3
2 Al-Qata'i: A Lost City in Cairo – Revisited <i>Tarek Swelim</i>	10
3 Cairo as a Palace: Rituals of the Fatimid Caliphate <i>Ayman Fouad Sayyid</i>	34
4 Building Mamluk Cairo: The Capital of a Sultanate <i>Omniya Abdel Barr</i>	45
5 Coopting the Street: The Urban Character of Mamluk Architecture in Cairo <i>Nasser Rabbat</i>	66
6 1340 Years of Cairo's Medieval Necropolis <i>Galila El Kadi</i>	83
7 Policing Cairo in the Nineteenth Century <i>Khaled Fahmy</i>	106

8	Khedivial Cairo: The Genesis of the Modern City and the Prospects of its Downtown <i>Soheir Hawas</i>	121
9	Tahrir Square: The Roundabout and the History of Modern Cairo <i>Mariam Abdelazim</i>	141
PART 2		
	Representations	161
10	The Skylines of Cairo: A Photographic Essay <i>Karim Badr</i>	163
11	The Earliest Images of Cairo's Islamic Architecture <i>Doris Behrens-Abouseif</i>	174
12	Seeing Cairo Through Paris: Nineteenth-Century Literary Observations by Egyptian Intellectuals <i>Kinda AlSamara</i>	205
13	Sayings and Songs: On the Intangible Culture of Cairo <i>Ahmed O. El-Kholei</i>	217
14	Cairo Through Her Eyes: Space and Gender Dynamics in Naguib Mahfouz's <i>Bayn Al-Qasrayn</i> <i>Mohammad Salama</i>	232
15	The Judge, the Officer and the Demiurge: Figures and Figurations of Old Cairo <i>Ann Madoeuf</i>	246
16	Cairo on Film: The Modernity of a Cinematic City <i>Nezar AlSayyad</i>	255
17	Revolutionary Cairo: The City Still Remembers <i>Dina Ezzat</i>	270
PART 3		
	Discourses	285
18	The Normalization of <i>Hijab</i> : Islamic Reveiling in Cairo <i>Sherifa Zuhur</i>	287

Contents

19	Informal Cairo: The Making of an Urban Fabric <i>Ahmed M. Soliman</i>	303
20	Cairo's Desert Backyard: The Future of an Ever-Growing Metropolis? <i>David Sims</i>	323
21	(Re)Connecting with Wounded Spaces: Encountering Memory, Place and Narrative in Cairo's Historic Landscape <i>Gehan Selim</i>	337
22	An Untold Urban Narrative: Transcending Gender, Culture and Modernity in Cairo's Old Quarters <i>Mohamed Gamal Abdelmonem</i>	353
23	Rethinking Urban Transformations in Cairo: A View from "Middle-Class" Housing in Al-Mohandiseen <i>Khaled Adham</i>	370
24	Government Visions: A Planner's Perspective on the Remaking of Cairo <i>Sahar Attia</i>	389
25	The Transformation of Public Space in Post-Revolutionary Cairo: A Diary from Tahrir, 2011–2013 <i>Mona Abaza</i>	409
	<i>Index</i>	425

4

BUILDING MAMLUK CAIRO

The Capital of a Sultanate

Omniya Abdel Barr

From 1250 to 1517, the Mamluk sultans reigned over a large territory, which comprised Egypt, Syria, Palestine and the Hijaz. They were the custodians of the three holy cities Makkah, Medina and Jerusalem, and oversaw several important viceroyalties, represented in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Tripoli and Gaza. The Mamluks established their new political regime in Cairo, the existing capital inherited from their Ayyubid masters, and before them the Fatimids. The city was defined by the Nile from the west, and was fortified from the northern and eastern sides, along the Muqattam hills. Cairo before the Mamluks already had a well-established urban character, with the Fatimid royal palaces, the numerous religious foundations, and the newly built Ayyubid Citadel. The city had a fluvial port in Fustat, and was adorned by many gardens and urban ponds. Under the Fatimids and later the Ayyubids, Fustat remained the industrial and commercial center, while *al-Qahira* housed the royal residences. When the Mamluks came to power, Cairo was already an important metropolis and the largest in the region. Yet, the city was about to experience its utmost makeover.

The Mamluks were great builders, and their architecture was adventurous. They invested in large-scale projects, reaching unprecedent breakthroughs. The attention to the smallest detail is striking and the levels achieved in perfecting the different craftsmanships are impressive. They also overcome multiple engineering challenges. The Mamluk period is regarded as a great outburst of creative design ideas and innovation. The architecture is massive, yet not oppressive. The longer you look, the more captivated you become. Most of the surviving medieval monuments and urban features are the result of the multiple projects commissioned by the Mamluks and their courts. Their patronage played a fundamental role in the creation of Cairo's renowned monumental legacy. The ruling class directly controlled all financial and technical aspects. As a result, Cairo developed at a very high speed and evolved into a vibrant city, projecting the desires and ambitions of its sponsors. This impressive patronage gave the Egyptian capital a new grand dimension as the city emerged outside its limits. A new empirical capital was in the making.

The Mamluks inherited an existing city in transition, divided between *al-Qahira* and Fustat, with two congregational mosques: al-Hakim in the north and 'Amr in the south. The city's expansion extended under the Mamluks, who played a pivotal role in elaborating Cairo's urban landscape. Constructions multiplied in many neighbourhoods and

the urban dynamism reached its **climax** by the mid-14th century, during the third reign of the **Bahri sultan al-Nasir Muhammad** (r. 1309–1340).¹ Later, under the Circassian sultans, the city stabilized with few transformations. During these splendour years, despite the political instabilities, Cairo expanded and covered **21 km²**. Damascus, the second city of the Mamluk sultanate, occupied only 2.7 km².

In this chapter, I present a chronological outline of Mamluk Cairo, through the numerous architectural projects and the development of the urban landscape. As soon as these monuments were elevated, they became attraction points in their neighbourhoods, and **played a role in the urban development**. These key Mamluk monuments contributed in shaping the medieval city. I propose to define “Mamluk Cairo” as the area described in the map of the *Description de l’Egypte*. This includes *al-Qahira*, the Fatimid city *intramuros* in the center. Then to the east of the *Khalij al-Masri*, the city’s two suburbs: *Bulaq* in the north and *Fustat* in the south. I am also adding the **extra-muros quarters**, which are grouped in four sections: the northern quarters of *Husayniyya* and *Raydaniyya* to the north of Bab al-Nasr and Bab al-Futuh; the southern quarters stretching from Bab Zuwayla to the mosque of Ibn Tulun and the Mashhad of Sayyida Nafisa, with the quarters of *al-Darb al-Ahmar*, *Bab al-Wazir*, *Suq al-Silah*, *Saliba* and *Khalifa*; the eastern quarters of the City of the Dead with the *Sahara* in the north and the *Qarafa* in the south; finally, the western quarters of the former port *al-Maqs*, *al-Luq* and *al-Nasiriyya*, contained within the area between the *Khalij al-Masri* and the *Khalij al-Nasiri*.

I am also following the postulate set by André Raymond, who defined that “the city’s public monuments constitute a ‘production’ from which (by utilizing their dates and geographical location) a study can be built up of the history of urbanization and the evolution of urban demographics, the building of one of these monuments normally constituting a sign of the presence of inhabitants for the religious needs of whom they will provide”.² This method assisted me in preparing a map to examine the Mamluk capital and understand its structure and evolution. The map shows the major monuments and neighbourhoods known historically till the mid-15th century, along with the medieval toponyms found in the Mamluk sources, especially in Maqrizi’s *Khitat* and *Suluk*. I tried visualizing how Mamluk Cairo was shaped, by studying the construction sites, their locations and the impact created on their surroundings (Figure 4.1)

The First Transformations

To understand Cairo’s evolution under the Mamluks, it is essential to look back at the city in the mid-12th century, with the end of the Fatimids (973–1171) and the rise of the Ayyubids (1171–1250). The first transformations can be traced to 1169, when the Fatimid Caliph al-‘Adid (r. 1160–1171) appointed Salah al-Din (1138–1193), a Sunni vizier to his court. After the Caliph’s death, Salah al-Din abolished the Fatimid rule and installed his own dynasty. **This political disruption affected the city with a remarkable urban renewal** to overcome the ruinous state reached.

The capital was divided between two agglomerations: *al-Qahira* in the north and *Fustat* in the south. An ambitious fortification project was launched to protect the city from expected threats, with a new set of walls, though it was never completed. In 1176, Salah al-Din took the decision to abandon the Fatimid palaces in *al-Qahira* and **launched the construction of fortified royal residences on top of the Muqattam hills**. The Ayyubid ruler selected a deserted location for a citadel, centrally positioned between *Fustat* and

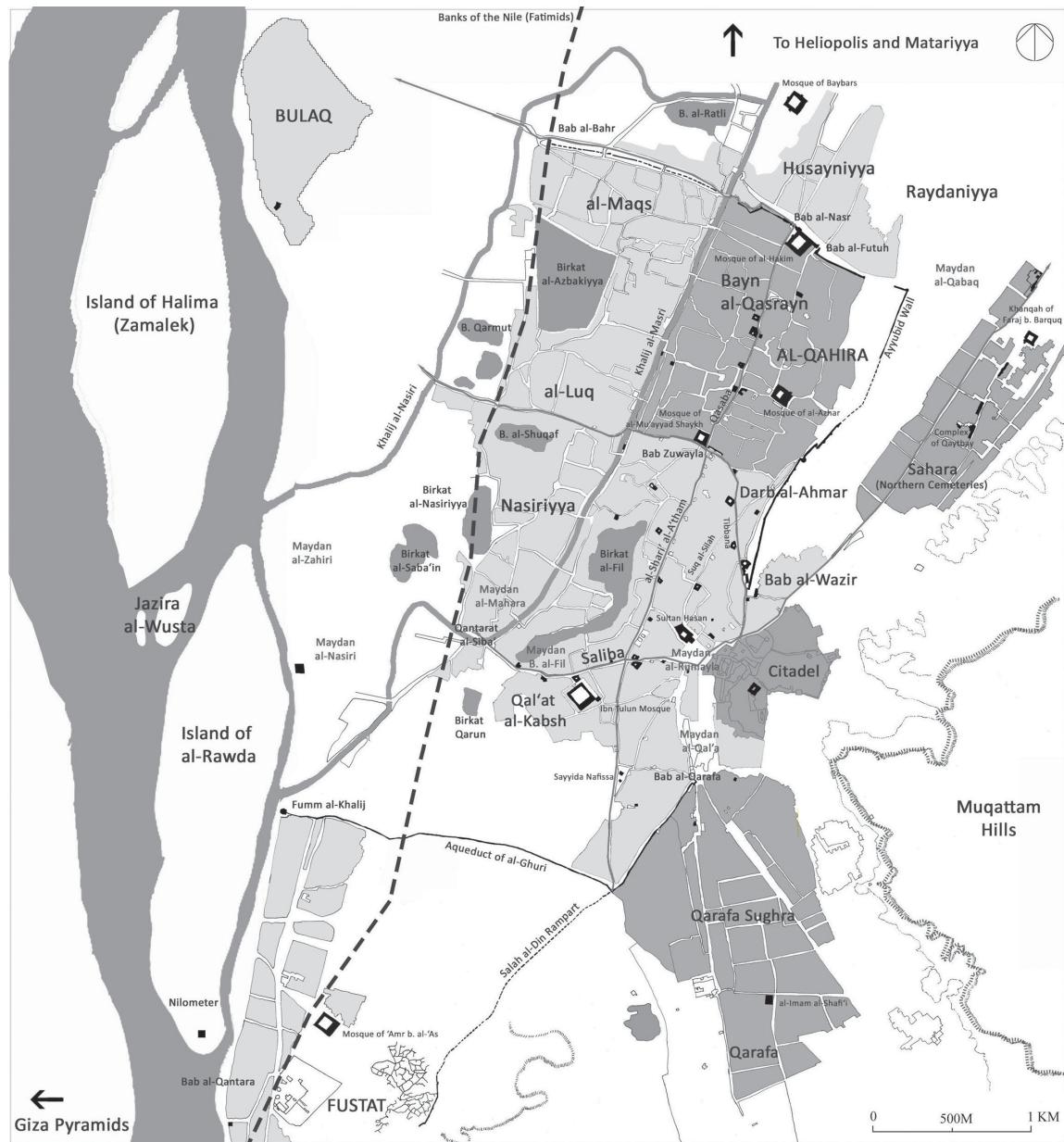


Figure 4.1 Map of Mamluk Cairo.

al-Qahira, and in the vicinity of the remains of the Tulunid capital “*al-Qata‘i*”. *Qal’at al-Jabal* was built in the Syrian fashion, as a military citadel dominating the cityscape, and it remained the symbol of the Egyptian ruling power under the Ayyubids, the Mamluks as well as the Ottomans until 1874, when Abdin Palace was inaugurated by Khedive Ismail (r. 1863–1879).

When the Mamluks came to power, Cairo had not one, but two citadels: *Qal’at al-Jabal* and *Qal’at al-Rawda*. The later was built by the seventh and last Ayyubid Sultan al-Salih Najm al-Din (r. 1240–1249), who left *Qal’at al-Jabal*, due to the unstable political situation, and moved his family and mamluks to the island of al-Rawda. This transfer did not last long. Following his death and the establishment of the Mamluk sultanate, *Qal’at al-Jabal* became once again the official ruling headquarter. Nevertheless, this short-lived shift left a mark on the city. Al-Salih placed a bridge at the opening of the canal

and ordered the construction of *belvédères (manazir)* on Mount of Yashkur or *Qal'at al-Kabsh*, to the west of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. Simultaneously, construction sites emerged on the banks of *Birkat al-Fil*.³ These projects were the first sparks which slowly triggered the urbanization of the northern section of the intermediate zone between *al-Qahira* and Fustat.⁴ The creation of *Qal'at al-Rawda* also impacted Fustat, as it compelled the regime's dignitaries and elites to invest in constructions opposite the island. At the end of the Fatimid period, some viziers were already living in Fustat. However, the southern suburb thrived further during the reign of al-Salih, and the transfer of the seat of power from the Muqattam hills to Rawda Island.⁵ Few projects were later commissioned by Mamluk elites,⁶ though the Mamluks generally favoured *al-Qahira* and invested less in Fustat.

During the Ayyubid period, *al-Qahira* lost its privileged Fatimid status of a “princely city”, and welcomed an invasion of a civilian population. Crafts and luxury trades followed their clientele inside the city, while the less noble installations remained in Fustat, such as naval construction sites, sugar and soap refineries and grain and wholesale warehouses.⁷ The Mamluks did not abandon the heart of *al-Qahira*, the city of the Fatimids, as was customary. On the contrary, driven by the desire to be seen and noticed, they took the decision to place their prestigious religious complexes exactly where the previous dynasties had existed.

In a city as large and complex as *al-Qahira*, the decision to select a location for a new construction site was not left to chance or convenience. In fact, such a decision was made strategically following careful studies. Since *al-Qahira* was already heavily urbanized, many Fatimid buildings had to be erased to allow for new constructions to emerge. In other words, the Mamluks demolished the heart of *al-Qahira*, and built on top of the Fatimid remains. To make room, yes, but also to erase the memory of a shi'ite legacy?

The construction politics already in place under the Ayyubids intensified with the Mamluks. The city was a place of diverse construction and restoration activities, but also a place of destruction and renovation. The main expansions targeted two areas: first, to the west of the canal, since the course of the Nile shifted further east, and new land opportunities appeared; then second, to the intermediate zone between *al-Qahira* and Fustat. By shifting the royal residences once again to *Qal'at al-Jabal*, new quarters emerged under the Citadel and around the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. This area changed significantly for political reasons but also for military ones. Abu-Lughod described this expansion as the biggest transformation in the city.⁸ The main north-south avenue “*al-Qasaba*” was extended, crossing *al-Saliba*, and connected these new quarters to *al-Qahira*: from Bab Zuwayla to the Mausoleum of Sayyida Nafisa. The new quarters *extra-muros* developed into highly urbanized and populated sectors. Soon enough, they started competing with the older quarters *intra-muros*.

The historical cemeteries were also subject to intensive expansion and development: from their northern limits to the south of the Citadel, from *Bab al-Qarafa* through the Mausoleum of Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 820) and further south to *al-Qarafa al-Sughra*. This renowned mausoleum, with the largest dome in Cairo, was commissioned by the Ayyubid Sultan al-Kamil (r. 1218–1238). A mosque was built earlier by Salah al-Din. The complex of Imam al-Shafi'i was built in an area already housing other saintly tombs, such as Imam al-Layth and of Sidi 'Uqba.⁹ In 1217, Ibn Jubayr visited the area and expressed his fascination with the architecture, describing the surroundings as a standalone city, with its infrastructure and equipment.¹⁰ The Mamluks first erected their funerary complexes in this area, before shifting north-east of the Citadel, and populating the Northern

Cemeteries or *al-Sahara'*. Maqrizi stated how these northern parts were empty until the third reign of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.

Reshaping the Heart of an Existing City

Bayn al-Qasrayn, the area housing the renowned Fatimid palaces in the heart of *al-Qahira*, experienced complete makeover and went through massive phases of alterations. Today, very few Fatimid vestiges survive, and the center of their capital was replaced with masterpieces of the highest order, reflecting the competitive ambitions of the Mamluk sultans and their Ayyubid masters.¹¹ *Bayn al-Qasrayn* remains the most strategic and celebrated spot in the medieval city, overlooking the main avenue: *al-Qasaba* or *al-Shari' al-A'tham*, known today as al-Mu'izz street. The destruction of the Fatimid palaces was initiated by the Ayyubids. Some spaces were converted into residences for the new aristocracy. Others were cleared out to reuse the land in the construction of new religious foundations. Salah al-Din built a *khanqah* and a *bimaristan*, but both have disappeared today.¹² Sultan al-Kamil completed a *madrasa* and a *rab'* on a piece of land which used to house parts from the western palaces.¹³ Furthermore, Sultan al-Salih demolished a section from the eastern palaces to elevate his two *madrasas*.¹⁴

Shajar al-Durr took the bold decision to place the mausoleum of her deceased husband within his religious foundation, in that same central location in the city. She demolished the *qa'a* dedicated to the Maliki Shaykh, in the northern section of al-Salih's *madrasa*, and constructed a dome. By doing so, the first and last Mamluk queen established a new trend in Cairo's monumental architecture, which largely remodeled the cityscape. Shajar al-Durr's initiative paved the way for a new practice: to build funerary foundations in the heart of the city. The Mamluks kept the tradition and transformed *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. This emblematic location attracted future Mamluk and later Ottoman rulers, all eager to position their symbolic mark in the city. But this would take some time!

Shajar al-Durr and her new Mamluk husband, Sultan al-Mu'izz Aybak (r. 1250–1257), moved outside the city, where land was abundant. She built her funerary *madrasa* in the cemetery of Sayyida Nafisa, which was more the custom at the time.¹⁵ Aybak went further away and built his *madrasa* in Fustat.¹⁶ Soon after in 1256, Sultan al-Muzaffar Qutuz (r. 1259–1260) started the construction of his *madrasa* below the Citadel in *Hadrat al-Baqar*, the area which later became the site of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan.¹⁷ A long decade passed, before the Mamluks installed themselves in the heart of the city. In March 1262, Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (r. 1260–1277) launched the works on his *madrasa* in *Bayn al-Qasrayn*.¹⁸

A land without clear ownership was possessed by the State. It was easy to allocate land for the ruling class outside the city, but inside the city, the situation was much more complex. Inserting a new building in an existing urban fabric presented real challenges. The only solution available was to buy existing buildings to demolish or remodel. The historic sources do not report how al-Salih succeeded in 1242 to acquire parts of the Fatimid palaces to secure land for the construction of his two *madrasas*. Yet, with the Mamluks, they become more descriptive. When describing a building, the historians often started by explaining the process of acquiring the land.

Two years after Baybars became sultan, he ordered the descendants of the last Fatimid Caliph al-'Adid to transfer their rights on all properties within the Fatimid palaces and their annexes to *Bayt al-Mal*.¹⁹ This is how the ownership was “legally” stripped from the

legitimate owners and given to the Mamluk State. These properties covered very significant areas. The transfer of ownership was essential to facilitate the purchase of existing structures and plots of land, for future architectural projects. Clearly Baybars was aware of the great significance of the location selected for his *madrasa*. The plan was adapted over the layout of *Qa'it al-Khiyam*, a reception hall attached to the mausoleum of al-Salih, which was by then owned by *Bayt al-Mal*. By annexing the *madrasa* to the mausoleum of his old Ayyubid master, Baybars was aspiring to demonstrate respect for his predecessor, acquire recognition from the population and consolidate the legitimacy of the newly established sultanate.

To purchase the reception hall, a simple sale transaction was performed. The price of the sale was estimated by the *wakil* of *Bayt al-Mal*. However, *Qa'it al-Khiyam* was not directly sold to the sultan. It was first bought by the Hanbali Shaykh of the Madrasa of al-Saliniyya, who then sold it to the sultan.²⁰ This transaction is interesting as it raises several questions. Why an intermediate sale? Why didn't the sultan purchase the property directly from *Bayt al-Mal*? Perhaps a new ruler should not mix personnel desires with Public Treasury? Or maybe Baybars wanted to keep an integral and virtuous image of the Mamluk sultan, who does not spoil other Muslim's possessions. After the glorious success of his military campaigns against the Crusaders, Baybars needed another project to express the strength of his reign. This could not be achieved in *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, so in 1267 he commissioned the construction of a Friday Mosque in the northern suburb of *Husayniyya*, known today as *al-Zahir* or *Dahir* in reference to the sultan and his monumental mosque.²¹

Sultan al-Mansur Qalawun (r. 1279–1290) is one of Cairo's great builders. Four years after securing his reign, he founded in the cemetery of Sayyida Nafisa, a funerary madrasa for his wife Fatima Khatun (d.1284), in which he later buried their son and heir al-Salih (d. 1288). His other son and new heir al-Ashraf Khalil (r. 1290–1293), who later would put an end to the Crusader's presence in the Holy Land, built a funerary *madrasa* steps away from his brother's tomb. One could have expected Qalawun to build his funerary complex next to the mausoleums of his wife and sons, but this was not the case.

In 1284, Qalawun launched one of the most ambitious construction sites ever made in Cairo, which was completed in only 13 months. It remains to this day an example of impressive architecture, exquisite design and refined craftsmanship. For his funerary complex, he selected a location opposite the monuments of his predecessors: al-Salih's mausoleum and Baybars's *madrasa*. Unlike Baybars, who did not attach a mausoleum to his *madrasa*, Qalawun annexed one to his complex.²² The sultan needed a prime location, but he also needed space. The motivation behind the construction of his funerary foundation was not only to create a tomb and a *madrasa*, but primarily to establish a hospital, which remained invisible from the main street. He modeled it on the one seen in Damascus.²³

The selected site was occupied by *Dar al-Qutubiyya*, one of the halls in the premises of the western palaces.²⁴ In this case, the building was in the possession of a descendant of the Ayyubids and not the Fatimids. Mu'nissa Khatun was the daughter of al-Malik al-'Adil, and therefore still owned her property. To secure this key location and acquire her property, the sultan himself negotiated the transaction. The sale was achieved directly between them with no interference from *Bayt al-Mal*. The sultan proposed an exchange with *Qasr al-Zumurrud*, which is confusing, as the palace was at that time in the possession of *Bayt al-Mal*. We see a shift and a more audacious move, compared to Baybars. To close the deal, Qalawun topped the sale with an extra sum of money.²⁵

It could be argued that the sale of *Dar al-Qutubiyya* was a forced one, as the construction site gained an unfortunate reputation. After the inauguration of the funerary complex, many angry voices were raised to oppose the sale and the project.²⁶ Despite the bad publicity, Qalawun's funerary dome was not just a royal burial place, but also became a place of ceremonies and celebrations. What was once contested as an unfair construction site became the *lieu* of royal traditions honoring the commencement of Mamluk sultans and amirs. At this point, a power shift took place between the Ayyubid dome of al-Salih and the Mamluk dome of Qalawun. Today, when we visit this majestic complex, only the monumentality of the architecture and the brilliance of the craftsmanship are remembered. Qalawun gave the city an iconic Mamluk dome and a prestigious landmark.

Al-Nasir Muhammad's reign was very impactful on the city, which extended beyond its walls as construction emerged in every corner. This architectural dynamism was championed by the young sultan, who also kept the ongoing tradition of building in *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. When back in power in 1299, after an interim of four years, al-Nasir acquired the unfinished foundation of Sultan al-'Adil Katbugha (r. 1295–1296), built on a site previously occupied by a *hammam*.²⁷ He completed the construction, replaced Katbugha's name on the façade's inscription band and added a majestic minaret with gypsum ornamentation on top of the iconic portal (Figure 4.2). This was an inevitable move, as the foundation was adjacent to Qalawun's monumental dome (Figure 4.3). Al-Nasir's funerary madrasa extended Qalawun's façade and created an intertwined relation between the two structures, as father and son. Its addition enhanced the architectural dialogue with the two opposite foundations and created a balance between the two sides of the street. This monumental cluster on Cairo's main avenue was *quasi* complete.

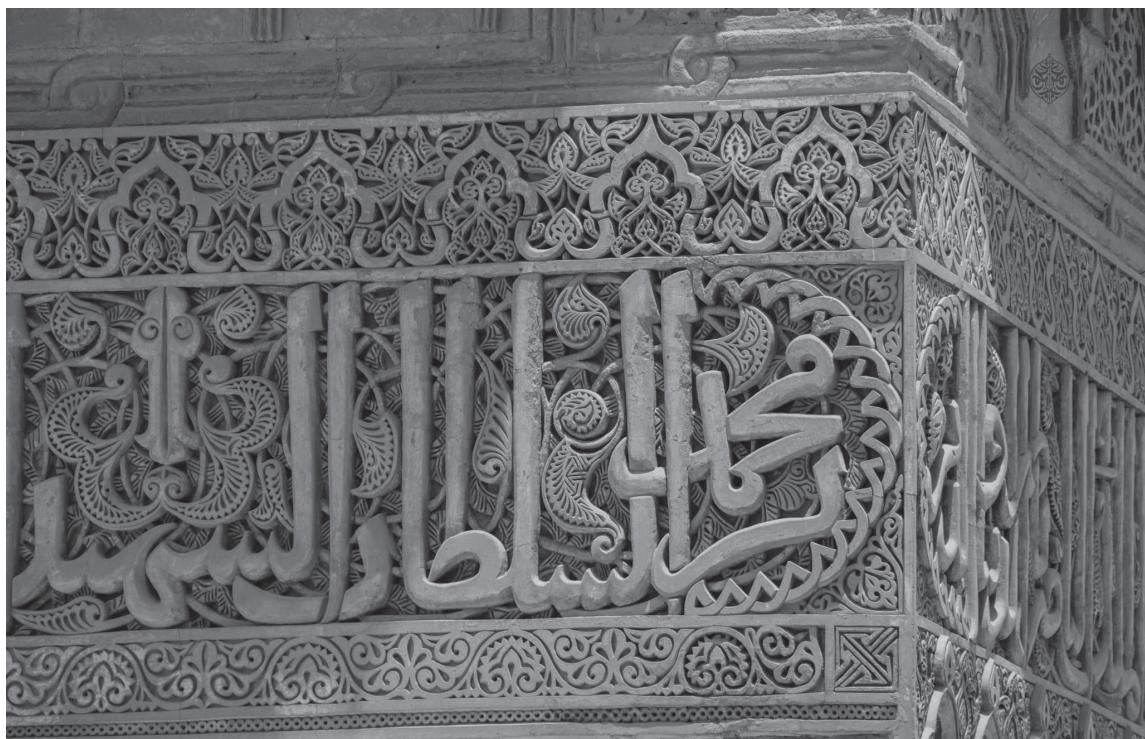


Figure 4.2 Detail from the minaret of al-Nasir Muhammad.
Gift of Omar al-Numani.



Figure 4.3 The minarets of the complexes of Sultan Qalawun and his son al-Nasir Muhammad, seen from the courtyard of the Madrasa of Sultan Qalawun.

It would take eight decades for another royal construction to be erected in this densely populated sector on Cairo's main avenue. No other Bahri sultan succeeded in securing land in *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. Sultan al-Muzaffar Baybars al-Jashankir (r. 1309), who seized power briefly before al-Nasir's third reign, inserted his funerary khanqah in a very difficult plot of land in the quarter Jamaliyya, to the north of *Bayn al-Qasrayn*.²⁸ Its entrance portal is four meters in recess compared to the main façade, which could suggest that this part from the street was included to provide additional space.²⁹ The selected site was originally part of *Dar al-Wizara al-Kubra*, which stood to the north of the Eastern palaces. When Baybars embarked on his project, he bought the remaining parameter available from this building, which was partially ruined with few dwellings built inside. He also bought a few houses in Fustat to use as construction material.³⁰ The madrasa previously built by amir Qarasunqur and adjacent to Baybars' Khanqah also used parts from *Dar al-Wizara*, which shows the large scale it once occupied.³¹ Two other amirs of al-Nasir's, known for their great rivalry, Qawsun and Bashtak, had palaces overlooking the main avenue. Bashtak built his palace on several plots of lands which he grouped, and Qawsun adapted an existing structure. Maqrizi suggested that the name *Bayn al-Qasrayn* also meant the palaces of these two powerful but very competitive amirs.

The Mamluks were very active builders and during their reign a variety of projects were launched. Many, if not all, were transformed into *waqf*, or endowment deed. This action blocked most of the land and properties, whether urban or agriculture. Available

land for new constructions was scarce and very difficult to find.³² Moreover, finding land in the city in key locations was an impossible mission. A solution was needed. In the 15th century, a legal trick was frequently employed to allow for architectural projects to take place. For a large-scale construction project to happen, an *istibdāl* was necessary. This meant replacing existing properties within the *waqf* with other ones.

In the early 14th century, this legal trick was not yet accepted and was viewed as immoral. Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'ban was hoping to erect his monumental madrasa in *Bayn al-Qasrayn* and wanted to take the site of *Khan al-Zakat*. But the qadis opposed the exchange as the *khan* was part of Sultan al-Nasir's endowment.³³ After failing to secure land in Cairo's most prestigious location, the sultan picked a site next to the Citadel. His madrasa was never completed.³⁴ Yet, this exact *istibdal* was later approved for the first Circassian sultan.³⁵ Al-Zahir Barquq attached his funerary khanqah to al-Nasir's foundation and gave *Bayn al-Qasrayn* the final majestic complex of Mamluk iconic architecture.³⁶

These Mamluk foundations erased the traces of the Fatimid Palaces. Today, only the name of *Bayn al-Qasrayn* survives. What was once a place of royal residencies became a place of worship, celebration and education. *Bayn al-Qasrayn* remains the prime location in the historic city, with its rich cultural heritage and strong visual memories. Visitors cross and admire the continuity of Cairene royal architecture, showing influences and innovations in artistic styles and techniques. What was once the heart of the Fatimid capital is repossessed by the Mamluks to project power, strength, creativity, superiority and prosperity.³⁷

A Capital Ready for More

A patron invested in a new construction to fulfil a desire or a devotion, but also for charity: to meet the demands of an existing population, or a projected one. Soon after, other equipment followed. A new royal foundation gets its reputation when it is consistently used, therefore it should not be built in an isolated area. As a result, the selection of the location was meaningful and sometimes it impacted the city.

The end of the tumultuous conflicts between the Mamluks and the Crusaders, then the Ilkhanids and the Mongols, created a political stability which was reflected in the architecture. The golden age of Mamluk art and architecture was achieved during the brilliant rule of al-Nasir Muhammad. His treasury was overflowing with revenues thanks to the economic prosperity accomplished with the activation of the international trade routes and the improved methods in agriculture. This cemented the Mamluk regime and influenced the city's development. New quarters emerged to the south of Bab Zuwayla, connecting *al-Qahira* to the Citadel for the first time.³⁸ Other quarters developed to the west of the canal such as *al-Nasiriyah*. These urban interventions were not randomly dispersed projects, but rather tentative solutions for real expansion. Al-Nasir was the first ruler with an urban vision, and he wanted to appropriate the city under his name. However, these expansions did not respond to demographic growth, but rather to his own urban ambitions. This explains the rapid decline of many areas after his death.

The construction projects launched during his reign surpassed by more than half any other reign. Al-Nasir spared no expense and invested like no other in architecture. He created *Diwan al-'ama'ir*, a technical bureau in his administration, and secured its funding. He encouraged his amirs to build and facilitated the construction operations: by providing land, paying for the works from his personnel accounts, securing the building

materials, and having it all supervised by his superintendents. Religious, but also public and commercial buildings multiplied. The city was buzzing with action. The amirs competed with their sultan, building mosques and *madrasas*, mausoleums and *khanqahs*, *wakalas* and *sabils*, *hammams* and palaces. The Mamluk patrons delivered an impressive architecture to demonstrate power and prestige.

Al-Nasir played a fundamental role in the improvement of *Qal'at al-Jabal*. He commissioned new palaces as well as the famous audience hall: the *iwan*.³⁹ At the end of al-Nasir's reign, he rebuilt his mosque in the Citadel and adorned the dome and minarets with eye-catching green tiles.⁴⁰ This mosque became another important landmark in the skyline. The Citadel contributed to the urbanization of the city's southern limits, with quarters stretching from outside *Bab Zuwayla* to the banks of *Birkat al-Fil* and around the old dig of *al-Saliba*, as well as on top of Mount Yashkur in the proximity of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun. This intermediate zone between *al-Qahira* and Fustat, first urbanized under al-Salih, became an open arena for architectural competition.

Baybars had previously built a residence for his son at the steps of the Citadel, to distance his entourage from the population and avoid any possible frictions.⁴¹ This approach was adopted again by al-Nasir, who commissioned luxurious palaces for his favored amirs to the west of the Citadel in *Hadarit al-Baqar* and *Midan al-Rumayla*. These two spots became the subject of a large-scale construction scheme. Two magnificent palaces were built for the amirs Yalbugha al-Yahawi and Altinbugha al-Maridani.⁴² Three other residencies were scheduled on a second plan for the amirs Qawsun, Aydijmish and Tashtumur al-Saqi. Later, during the first reign of al-Nasir's seventh son, Sultan Hasan (r. 1347–1351), another palace was commissioned in this busy area by amir Manjak al-Yusufi.⁴³ To the west of *Birkat al-Fil*, two palaces were constructed for Arghun al-Kamili and Baktumur al-Saqi. These palaces were known as *istabl*, meaning stable. They were smaller citadels on their own scale, housing the amir's family, mamluks and horses. Nothing survives today apart from two vestiges of Qawsun's and Manjak's once exquisite palaces. Their remains still show details of refined princely architecture from the period of al-Nasir and his sons. Yet regrettably, they are hit by ruin and are seriously at risk.

Two new east-west avenues were created in Mamluk Cairo, to rival the old saturated *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. The first avenue extended east from *Bab Zuwayla* to the Citadel (Darb al-Ahmar, al-Tibbana and *Bab al-Wazir*) and the second from *Fumm al-Khalij* to the Citadel (*al-Saliba*). The urbanization of these two axes was launched thanks to the patronage of the amirs of Sultan al-Nasir, who commissioned princely residences and religious foundations which easily rival any royal patronage. The axis of *al-Saliba* was launched first, with Sanjar al-Jawli, who in 1303 ordered the construction of his *madrasa*/*khanqah*. During the following five decades, the amirs directed their attention to al-Tibbana, an area slightly urbanized and previously used as cemeteries. In 1324, Ahmad al-Mihmandar ordered the construction of a mosque with a *rab'* and *qaysariyya*.⁴⁴ Then, in 1329 Alnaq al-Nasiri built a palace. Eight years after, Altinbugha al-Maridani started the construction of a mosque largely inspired by his master's green-domed mosque at the Citadel. Next, Aqsunqur al-Nasiri built his mosque, known today by the name of the Blue Mosque.

Returning to *al-Saliba* during sultan Hasan's reign, amir Shaykhu commanded a very ambitious project consisting of two large foundations, opposite each other. This is perhaps the only place in the city where two street sides of Mamluk Cairo have frozen in time. In 1349, he initiated the construction of the mosque to the north. Six years later, he started working on the *khanqah* to the south. The following year, in 1356, Sargatmish



Figure 4.4 al-Saliba Street.

Gift of Mostafa El Sadek.

placed his madrasa on the north west corner of the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, steps away from its spiral minaret (Figure 4.4).

Mamluk females were also great patrons, and they left a great presence in the city. In 1368, Sultan Sha'ban's (r. 1363–1376) mother, Baraka Khan, offered *al-Tibbana* its most spectacular monument, when she built her impressive *madrasa* famed for its sophisticated muqarnas in the entrance portal. Yet, it would be Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh (r. 1412–1421) who, many decades after, imposed a strong royal presence on this east-west avenue, which was by then well urbanized and populated. The two monuments he erected at the north and south ends gave this avenue a sense of power and proportion. Here again, the choice of location was carefully studied and selected.

Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh built with a fixed mindset, to surpass his predecessors and intimidate his successors. In 1415 he started the construction of his mosque, on the site of an Ayyubid prison *al-Shama'il* in which he was incarcerated before becoming sultan.⁴⁵

Mu'ayyad Shaykh inserted confidently his imposing minarets on top of the Fatimid door of Bab Zuwayla and opposite the *Duhaysha* of his rival, sultan Faraj ibn Barquq (r. 1399–1412). This is another spot in the city in which an architectural, historical and political dialogue persists to the present. Later, in 1418, he seized the ruined site of the Madrasa of Sultan Sha'ban on *Maydan al-Rumayla* and completed the works, while converting the structure into a *bimaristan*. One could suggest that the construction of the mosque and *bimaristan* in such crucial and pivotal locations with existing urban memories was a brilliant choice made by the sultan. It reveals his strength and perhaps his wish to crush the memories of his predecessors. These two grand and high structures were certainly visible from different spots in the city and still dominate the medieval city's skyline.⁴⁶

Mamluk Cairo's expansion was additionally influenced by the desire of the political class to create ceremonial places for their games and tournaments. The planning of *maydans* or hippodromes within the city responded to the demands of these ruling elites and provided places for training and entertainment.⁴⁷ The challenge was to secure the water supply for irrigation and to maintain the ongoing activities. These training and ceremonial fields provided equipment and infrastructure. As a result, they accelerated the urbanization of their surroundings. Perhaps, the selection of the locations was made with the intention of inciting an urban expansion? For example, *Maydan Birkat al-Fil* encouraged Cairenes to populate it, to the extent that it was totally urbanized during the reign of al-Nasir and became thereafter the construction site of the palace of amir Baktumur al-Saqi.⁴⁸ The environs of *Birkat al-Fil* had been a very popular destinations since the early 14th century. This popularity was partially due to the *maydan*, but also thanks to what the pond offers.

Mamluk Cairo and the Nile

One must not forget how Cairo was once a city of canals and *belvédères*. Imagine sailing down the *Khalij al-Masri* from the south, gazing east and looking at the rich silhouette of the Mamluk city. It must have been extraordinary! The maintenance of *al-Khalij*, the canal securing the water supply to the city, was always a task high on every ruler's agenda. The Mamluks invested in many engineering and hydraulic structures, to protect the city from the Nile's ferocity and secure the accessibility to the banks of the canal. The many bridges, *qantara* or *jisr* listed in the Mamluk sources, give an idea of the magnitude of the work done. The digging of *al-Khalij al-Nasiri* was possibly what affected the city the most geographically.⁴⁹ The canal's center was placed over the center of an old shore of the Nile. This new canal was essentially created to feed another new project. Al-Nasir's ambitions had no limits, so he travelled 30 kilometres northeast and launched another challenging construction site. He selected an area around *Birkat al-Hajj* and ordered the construction of the Khanqah of Syracuse.⁵⁰ This area received tremendous attention, with the sultan's many visits and sojourns, while escaping Cairo. In addition, al-Nasir added a hippodrome and a market.

Cairo's urban landscape has always been greatly affected by the Nile. During the flood seasons, happening at the end of the summer, canals and ponds were filled with water for several months. Later, the water evaporated or infiltrated the soil, and the ponds were replaced with gardens, waiting for the next flood season. These places of leisure attracted builders, who rushed to acquire a piece of land in a good location. With such a changing natural environment, the banks of the ponds offered exciting and enjoyable views

throughout the year. *Birkat al-Fil* was the most renowned pond in Mamluk Cairo, and it remained an attractive location for the upper classes till the end of the Sultanate.

Around the end of the 15th century, two more neighborhoods were developed in the north: Bulaq and Azbakiyya. Bulaq, previously an island, was connected to the city's banks and became Cairo's main fluvial port, after the decline of Fustat. Azbakiyya was a pond, around which a new aristocratic residential quarter emerged. One could propose that this second urbanization was influenced by the first, as Azbakiyya's location is midway between Cairo and Bulaq.⁵¹ This newly developed urban center was competing with the old one around *Birkat al-Fil*. The emerging quarter of Azbakiyya, surrounding the pond bearing the name of the developing patron, Amir Azbak ibn Tatak, eclipsed the attractiveness of the quarters of *Birkat al-Fil* in the following centuries.

Hit by Ruin

The death of al-Nasir Muhammad in 1341 did not stop the building activities. However, seven years later this construction fever was reduced when the country was hit by the **Black Death**. The plague attacked multiple times, and its effect left severe marks on the city.⁵² Mamluk Cairo lost its large and dynamic population, and many quarters were deserted. Maqrizi reported how, in one day, the residents of an entire street died. Despite this fatal calamity, the State became the sole beneficiary of every soul lost without inheritors, and the treasury kept on being filled. The construction site of the Madrasa of Sultan Hasan started in these circumstances in 1356.

A mental map of the city was painted by two great historians: Maqrizi (d. 1442) and Ibn Duqmaq (d. 1406). Their textual inventories, written at the beginning of the 15th century, were not made to celebrate a city, but rather to highlight a crisis. Unprecedented difficulties occurred, and culminated during the reign of al-Nasir Faraj (r. 1399–1412). Cairo's demography was reduced, the city was facing substantial economical struggles, and the Mamluk regime was confronting many instabilities.⁵³ Yet, the city was not entirely lost, and it still rivaled all other neighboring capitals. The Egyptian historian al-Qalqashandi (1355–1418), who was responsible for the Mamluk chancellery during the reign of Sultan al-Zahir Barquq, wrote in his 14-volume encyclopedia “*Subh al-a'sha fi sina'a at al-insha*” some lines describing the image of Mamluk Cairo at his time:

The architecture of Cairo is continuing at all times to flourish, and its landmarks are being rejuvenated. Especially after the ruin of Fustat and the displacement of its inhabitants towards the city, as previously described, until Cairo reached its current image: with magnificent palaces, grand residences, and vast houses, with extended markets and enjoyable belvédères, and delightful mosques, pleasant madrasas, and sumptuous khanqah. It is something unheard of in any other territory and has no equivalent in another country.⁵⁴

Despite all these challenges, the process of commissioning and launching new construction sites for the ruling elite was not severely affected. A ruined city meant that more plots of land were made available. The city's image was about to change again. A new dynasty was in place under the Circassian Mamluks, and the State's revenues was concentrated in the hands of one man: the sultan, who became the only builder. The construction fever of the past century would quieten.

The Mamluk Desert: *al-Sahara'*

During the Bahri period, the Mamluk amirs continued the tradition of building mausoleums in the Qarafa, to the north and south of the Mausoleum of Imam al-Shafi'i and close to *ahl al-bayt*. Few mausoleums for non-princely patrons were built in the northern cemeteries, the area which was later called *al-Sahara'* by the Mamluk historians. Two wives of al-Nasir also erected mausoleums there. It was with al-Nasir Faraj that the *al-Sahara'* became a destination for royal and princely patronage. Faraj needed space and the city was saturated, so he chose to place his funerary khanqah in this remote site to the north of the historic cemeteries. He accomplished his father's request and buried him in the desert and not in his mausoleum in *Bayn al-Qasrayn*. The building was not yet completed when he placed his father to rest under the main dome.⁵⁵ The premature death of the young sultan stopped his projected expansion plans in this remote area. Nevertheless, this first initiative encouraged the following sultans to invest in this new location, outside the city walls. The Mamluk sultans and amirs launched numerous funerary complexes, and secured the urban equipment needed for the communities. Faraj had already attached two sabilis to his *khanqah* to provide drinking water.

Eight years, after completing a funerary madrasa to the south of *Bayn al-Qasrayn* on *al-Shari‘ al-Atham*, al-Ashraf Barsbay (r. 1422–1437) directed his attention to the *al-Sahara'* and ordered the construction of a second mausoleum, in which he was buried. He attached it to a mosque-khanqah. Sultan Inal (r. 1453–1461) moved a bit away and placed his funerary complex to the north of Faraj and Barsbay's. Half a century later, Amir Qurqumas joined the site of Inal and created a large complex with a monumental mausoleum.

The peak reached was with sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay (r. 1468–1496) and the construction of his magnificent funerary complex, which he started in 1470, along with a loggia and a drinking trough. Qaytbay placed his complex to the south of his predecessors. This building was the first of many more architectural projects completed in the artistic excellence characterizing his reign. The *Sahara'* was a less active version of *Bayn al-Qasrayn*, with royal foundations built on both sides of the main street. Its domes and minarets attracted many visitors in the following centuries, as it was on the routes of the traveling caravans to Syria and the Hijaz. It is a place built to commemorate the dead, but from its inception it has also been a place dedicated for the living. It could be seen as a parallel city to the city (Figure 4.5).

The Capital's Final Appearance

The Mamluk capital regained its past Bahri splendour, when al-Ashraf Qaytbay was made sultan (r. 1468–1496). The city was spread out. Many of his amirs and dignitaries built in the city. Qaytbay chose *al-Sahara'* for this funerary complex, but he also erected a madrasa in *Qal‘at al-Kabsh* and the first standalone *sabil-kuttab* in *al-Saliba*. Despite the previous restoration efforts made by sultan al-Zahir Jaqmaq (r. 1438–1453), many buildings and equipment remained dilapidated. Under Qaytbay, and like no other sultan, major interventions took place. The sultan ordered the restoration and rescue of many buildings from both Mamluk periods. I consider the addition he made to the Khanqah of Faraj ibn Barquq one of his finest works. He gifted this monument with a stone *minbar* and a *dikka*, which are masterpieces and reveal a sophisticated craftsmanship (Figure 4.6). In addition, Qaytbay restored the ruined structures included in the *waqf* of the restored



Figure 4.5 'al-Sahara', entitled "Cairo: Tombs of the Khalifs".

Unknown photographer – Victoria and Albert Museum: 338-1924.

foundations. The restoration efforts consolidated the city's commercial activities.⁵⁶ His ruling elite also assumed responsibility towards their city and had an interest in the concept of aesthetics and cleanliness, which reflected on public health.⁵⁷ The sultan's efforts were not limited to Cairo, but also extended to the three holy cities.⁵⁸

Throughout the Mamluk period, and even under the many epidemic and stormy phases, Cairo's urban development and architectural enrichment never stopped. If we look at Meinecke's list of Cairo's diverse structures commissioned by the political and bureaucratic classes, we notice how the investment in architecture multiplied with very few interruptions.⁵⁹ Qaytbay and later Qansuh al-Ghuri (r. 1501–1516) presented the city with its finest monuments (Figure 4.7). This shows how till the very end, the level of finesse and sophistication in Mamluk architecture persisted. At the beginning of the 16th century, the Mamluk capital was still an exciting city admired and appreciated by visitors. This would change dramatically under the Ottoman rule, when Cairo lost the investments of great patrons and the status of an imperial capital.

Conclusion

The Mamluk sultanate was put to an end by the Ottomans in 1517. Despite the abrupt and violent ending to their rule, their legacy continues today, and their patronage is acknowledged in the elegant monuments they have left behind. The Mamluks created an audacious and extravagant city and were the driving force behind developing the urban environment. By holding power over policies and economies, they controlled the architectural projects and the urban infrastructure. At the end of the Mamluk sultanate, Cairo had reached its limits. The city was reduced in the following centuries. At the time of the French expedition in 1798, Cairo's size was confined to only 8.5 km², less than half.⁶⁰ Even during such periods of decline, the city still exceeded Baghdad's in its prime.⁶¹



Figure 4.6 Detail from the minbar of Qaytbay at the Funerary Khanqah of Faraj b. Barquq. Egyptian Heritage Rescue Foundation.

At the beginning of the sultanate, the Mamluk capital was subject to intense architectural and urban activities. A real construction fever took over the city and pushed it in all directions beyond the Ayyubid limits. The Mamluk sultans and their political entourage gave the medieval city its current historic image. Adorned with a magnitude of multifunctional monuments, the Egyptian capital was gifted with a historical architectural glory. Thanks to the almost continuous chain of construction sites, the city turned the page on its Fatimid and Ayyubid heritage and crafted a new legacy with the Mamluks. At the turn of the 14th century, five decades after the establishment of their empire, the Mamluks were the most important power in the Mediterranean. Their capital became one of the most venerated megalopolises.

Though, what were they erecting? The builders of Mamluk Cairo launched different types of construction. Mamluk Cairo did not have a special department responsible to manage the city's urban development, and provide it with the needed infrastructure and

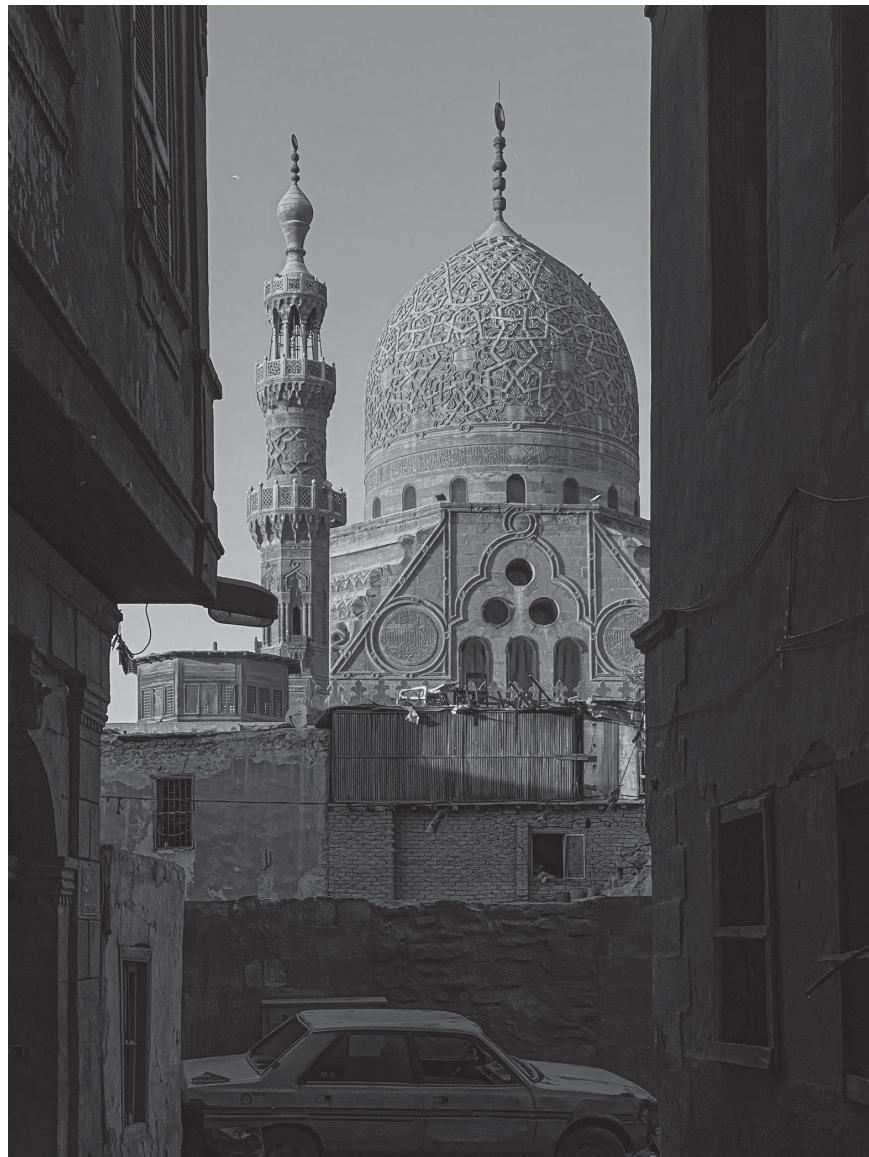


Figure 4.7 The Mausoleum of Sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay.
Gift of Almoatasem Bellah Haggag.

service buildings for the different communities. All these variant construction projects are the result of the political class and civilian elites' private initiatives. Surely, sometimes we find serious tentative projecting the expansion of a quarter or the urbanization of a waste-land. However, such huge operations remain the work of individuals and not institutions. The only official body present was the endowment system. In short, the urbanization of Mamluk Cairo rested on the desires of the political class and the *waqf* system.

The political class invested largely in religious, educational and funerary foundations. They spent generously for the construction of their residences and places of power. They also gave the city engineering and hydraulic installations necessary to protect it from the Nile's flooding. Furthermore, they commissioned multiple service buildings, such as public baths (*hammams*) and apartment blocks (*rab'*), which were usually added in *waqf* for their financial rentability. Moreover, as Cairo grew into an important destination in international trade, the city built *wakalas'*,

These new buildings sent different messages, explaining the reasons for which they were made. The Mamluks built in their capital to spread an image of piety and virtue, to establish places of worship but also of learning and education. These sponsors embarked on numerous construction projects to leave a trace commemorating their name, but also for this name to resonate and impress. They spent large sums of money to show power and strength and their elevated ranks. Sometimes, the reason for this architectural dynamism was simply to keep a promise. Moreover, they built for the city, to embellish it, develop it and maintain its renowned image and prestige as the capital of a powerful sultanate.

Under the Ottoman rule, the imposing character of the Mamluk city was not altered, erased or pushed aside. Instead of continuing more expansion, the city densified the Mamluk alignment and boundaries. Many years after the fall of the Mamluk Sultanate, and even today, one could still feel the Mamluk soul and patronage over the medieval city. By observing the style of Cairene architecture built under the Ottomans, throughout the following three centuries, it is possible to notice how the builders of Cairo kept the Mamluk traditions and built with the same architectural techniques. Naturally, new influences occurred, but the craftsmen of Cairo remained mostly faithful to the rules and features set by the Mamluk master craftsmen. This singularity and strong character were immediately spotted, five centuries after, by the architects commissioned by the Baron Empain. It was this Mamluk style that influenced the European architects when they started designing a new city in the desert.

Notes

- 1 The sultan rule was interrupted twice: 1/1294–1295; 2/1299–1309; 3/1309–1340.
- 2 A. Raymond 2003, 146–167.
- 3 T. Al-Maqrizi 1934–1972, 1: 341; 2000–2004, 3: 439, 484, 485, 585, 586.
- 4 This area will not be fully urbanized until the mid-20th century.
- 5 T. Al-Maqrizi 2000–2004, 2: 146.
- 6 Like al-Afram, a powerful amir who started his career under the Ayyubids. He built a trench and a massive estate at the south of the city. T. Al-Maqrizi 2000–2004, 4,2: 804.
- 7 J.-C. Garcin 1982, 162.
- 8 During the Fatimid period, this area was occupied by Sudanese soldiers. Salah al-Din destroyed their barracks and started developing this area into parks and gardens. See J. Abu-Lughod 1971, 30.
- 9 Imam al-Layth b. Sa‘ad (712–791) was born in Qalqashanda in the Delta. His mausoleum was first built during the Ayyubid period and then renovated by Sultan al-Ghuri. Imam al-Layth could have had his own school of Islamic law and jurisprudence, but it is said that his disciples did not invest enough in his teaching after his death. Sidi ‘Uqba was one of the first conquerors who came with ‘Amr b. al-‘As. While visiting the area in 2013, a craftsman owning a tile workshop in the area explained that his grandfather told him how visitors at the turn of the 20th century removed their shoes before entering the area, and reaching the three mausoleums.
- 10 Ibn Jubayr 2003, 40.
- 11 N. AlSayyad 1994, 74.
- 12 D. Behrens-Abouseif 2007, 51.
- 13 T. Al-Maqrizi 2000–2004, 2: 425.
- 14 M. Ibn Abd al-Zahir 1996, 85.
- 15 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004 3, 56.
- 16 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 3: 586.
- 17 M. Ibn Iyas 1961, 1, 1: 308.
- 18 T. Al-Maqriz, 2002–2004, 4,2: 505; A. Ibn Taghri Birdi 1963–1972, 7: 120. The madrasa was demolished in 1874 with the opening of the street of Bayt al-Qadi.

- 19 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 2: 286–287.
- 20 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 505.
- 21 This is the first Friday Mosque built by the Mamluks. For more about the choice of this location, see D. Behrens-Abouseif 2007, 121; T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,1: 188.
- 22 Baybars is buried in Damascus.
- 23 Bimaristan Nur al-Din.
- 24 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 2: 286, 4,2: 692. *Dar al-Qutubiyya* is the palace of Sitt al-Mulk, the Fatimid princess, and the sister of the Caliph al-Adid. This palace was previously known by the residency of Amir Fahr al-Din Jaharkas. It was enclosed within the western palaces. At the end of the Fatimid rule, Salah al-Din gave this palace to his brother al-Malik al-Adil. The palace became later known as *Dar al-Qutubiyya*, the daughter of al-Adil.
- 25 *Qasr al-Zumurrud* was part of the eastern complex of the Fatimid palaces and overlooked *Rahbit Bab al-'Id*.
- 26 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 698.
- 27 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 524.
- 28 It is also the oldest surviving *khanqah* in Cairo.
- 29 L. Fernandes 1987, 32.
- 30 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 732.
- 31 Amir Qarasunqur built in 1300–1301 his madrasa on parts of the site of Dar al-Wizara. Sultan Baybars al-Jashankir erected his khanqah in 1307, adjacent to this madrasa. T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 556.
- 32 L. Fernandes 2000, 206. S. Denoix 1999, 24.
- 33 T. Al-Maqrizi 1934–72, 2: 690.
- 34 The madrasa of Sultan al-Ashraf Sha'ban was demolished by Sultan Faraj b. Barquq. The site was acquired by sultan al-Mu'ayyid Shaykh, for his *bimaristan*. T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 702.
- 35 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,2: 680.
- 36 Worth noting that Muhammad Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1848) introduced two *sabīl* on the main *qasaba*. He built the first in 1822 nearby Bab Zuwayla and the second in memory of his son Ismail Pasha in 1829, opposite the complexes of Qalawun and al-Nasir's. This shows how the importance of *Bayn al-Qasrayn* and Cairo's main avenue persisted till the 19th century.
- 37 Regrettably for the Mamluk patrons, these historically renowned royal foundations have lost their religious and educational functions. Prayers are no longer held, and the spaces have been converted into tourist and artistic attractions.
- 38 He reigned for three periods. First at the age of ten from 1295 to 1296. Then again, from 1299 to 1309. And finally, again from 1309 to 1340.
- 39 It survives in the drawings published in the *Description de l'Egypte*, as it was later destroyed by Muhammad Ali for his emblematic mosque.
- 40 It is believed that the tiles originated from Tabriz.
- 41 A. Ibn Taghri Birdi 7, 190.
- 42 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 3: 233.
- 43 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 4,1: 308.
- 44 N. Warner 2005, 106.
- 45 This prison was built during the reign of Sultan al-Kamil.
- 46 N. Hampikian 2012, 204.
- 47 See J.-C. Garcin 1984, 114–130.
- 48 T. Al-Maqrizi 2002–2004, 3: 630.
- 49 J. Abu-Lughod 1971, 35.
- 50 A. Raymond 1993, 129.
- 51 For Bulaq see N. Hanna 1983, and for Azbakiyya see D. Behrens-Abouseif 1985.
- 52 M. Dols 1977, 211.
- 53 J. Loiseau 2010, 15.
- 54 S. Al-Qalqashandi 1913, 3: 370.
- 55 D. Behrens-Abouseif 2007, 231.
- 56 For more information on Qaytbay's patronage, see D. Behrens-Abouseif 1998.
- 57 In 1477, Yashbak b. Mahdi, an amir of Sultan Qaytbay, ordered some façade repairs. D. Behrens-Abouseif 2007, 62.

58 A list of restoration projects implemented by Qaytbay in Cairo, Jerusalem, Makkah and Medina is compiled in my PhD thesis, 2015.

59 Meinecke, M., 1992.

60 S. Makariou 2012, 241.

61 Baghdad was the capital of the Abbasids Caliphs in the 10th century.

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